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ABSTRACT

Projects that require students to perform ethnographic research can be a form of empowerment. Lester Faigley argues that while ethnographic research still requires invention and other writing skills required of more traditional assignments, it has the added value of giving students the opportunity to explore their own locations within the culture. One such location would be internet newsgroups. These electronic communities are equally representative of the cultural assumptions and priorities given to various issues and, not unlike other media, range from conservative to liberal in their discussions of events, issues, and even people. Electronic ethnography is most easily implemented if students have access to a composition course taught in a computer-networked classroom. In many instances, gathering data about the newsgroup leads a student to new knowledge about his or her own cultural assumptions about people who participate in these groups. For example, in a collaborative paper about a group devoted to fitness, both the women and men's assumptions were that women would be concerned about their weight, while men would be concerned with health, not weight. Such binaries were broken down for these students when through their own reading and participation they recognized that both women and men had self-esteem problems directly attributed to their bodies. Ultimately, the newsgroup can serve as a microcosm of cultural assumptions and attitudes that student participants may see as either harmful or helpful in the construction of both a personal and social identity through the technological access to community. (TB)

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"Ethnography and the Internet: Research into Electronic Discourse Communities"
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While it is important to design more multicultural projects around traditional research formats in order to allow students access to the conventions of the academic discourse community, as well as to allow the introduction of issues of race, class, and gender issues into the writing curriculum, it is equally important to include a focus on researching the material experience of our students and of other cultures and sub-groups. With this rationale in mind, scholars that include Lester Faigley and James Zebroski have implemented ethnographic research of mass cultural experience into the writing curriculum. In explaining his shift from traditional research project to the ethnography, Zebroski explains that unlike the "well-intentioned scavenger hunts in the library" which portray knowledge as a product to be gathered, ethnographies put students in the position of being knowledge-makers in the classroom and in contemporary culture as equally valued sites of such knowledge making. Ethnography, for Zebroski, becomes a form of student empowerment, for both the student and the teacher are composing knowledge, with students "no longer copying what other people say" (43). Speaking of ethnographies, Faigley asserts that have students write such analyses of local culture as one way to "involve students in how mass culture is produced, circulated, and consumed and how people actually use mass culture" (219). And while Faigley notes that ethnographic research still requires invention and other writing activities required of more traditional assignments, including synthesizing and revising, he argues the added value of the ethnography is its "opportunity to explore [students'] own locations within their culture" (223).

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Although many typical sites of student ethnography include their places of work, pleasure (the shopping mall, a rock concert), and even homelife, there also exist opportunities for students to explore the process of identification and community that is fostered by a an even more recent form of cultural discourse, internet newsgroups. These electronic communities are equally representative of the cultural assumptions and priorities given to various issues and not unlike other media, range from conservative to liberal in their discussions of events, issues, and even people. By introducing students to usenet groups through ethnographic research, not only will students gain a sense of how language practices can foster a sense of community but also a sense of how power-relations are represented by who speaks and who does not speak within the electronic communities, as well as what is and what is not allowed for discussion.

For example, my own involvement in an internet group devoted to discussions of interest to technical communicators both in industry and in academe revealed that the primary participants were men and women already employed in industry and who spoke with authority on issues. Graduate and undergraduate students, on the other hand, rarely appeared on the group, posting occasionally to ask questions about getting resources, finding internships and jobs, and so forth. Moreover, those who posted on issues deemed not of relevance to the majority of technical communicators were either ignored or "flamed," a process in which the person making the post was vehemently denounced by other members of the group. Because of the complex rhetorical and cultural practices associated with any discourse, electronic or otherwise, Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran have argued that more study of the rhetoric of electronic communication is needed to understand the possibilities and constraints that contribute to the production, circulation and consumption of electronic discourse, including such issues as audience, for "in writing to a screen, writers may at times lose the sense of an audience, and lose the constraints and inhibitions that the imagined audience provides" (631). A student ethnography of electronic discourse communities

is one step in helping students recognize these rhetoric and cultural constraints put upon participants, including their own participation in electronic bulletin boards and discussion groups of interest to them.

Of course, student participation in electronic communication assumes they have the awareness and access to the technology in which such forums take place. However, such access is necessary to foster a sense of empowerment through increased access to the information and applications students may use to construct new texts that critique, resist, and revise existing texts and contexts. This access, given the general recognition of the power of computers in the composing process and the recognition that computers should be made available to composition students in a classroom setting, seems even more possible as teachers and administrators themselves become more literate in this area.

Thus the construction of an electronic ethnography is most easily implemented if students themselves have access to a composition course taught in a computer-networked classroom. Once the teacher has secured students' access to technology, he or she can implement an ethnographic research assignment such as the following for use in the composition classroom:

> E-mail is becoming the preferred communication mode in both business and industry for its speed and access, yet e-mail is also a way for many people, be they the fans of David Letterman or Madonna, to fitness groups, or women's rights coalitions, to find solidarity and group identification, and a sense of resistance to mainstream discussions of many contemporary issues. The first task during the semester is for students to involve themselves in an electronic discussion group of their choice and spend time each week reading and with hope responding to some of the comments and conversations. After two months of weekly participation, students

will analyze the group for dominant and less dominant speakers, topics, values, discourse conventions, linking such issues to their own participation, or lack thereof, within the group. Finally, students will offer a commentary on the ethics of the group communication practices, evaluating the level of inclusion or exclusion of varying groups or perspectives.

In many instances, gathering data about the newsgroup leads a student to new knowledge about the student's own cultural assumptions about the people participating in these groups. For example, in a collaborative paper about a group devoted to fitness, both the women and men's assumptions were that women would be concerned about their weight, while men would be concerned with health, not weight. Such binaries were broken down for these students when through their own reading and participation they recognized that both women and men had self-esteem problems directly attributed to their bodies and that the gendered attributes for men were to be strong and muscular and for women to be cellulite-free. Furthermore, the students also recognized that the group served as a type of confessional for both women and men seeking advice, putting themselves in less authoritative positions than others supposedly expert because of their "success" at being trim, often being subtly reprimanded by these authorities for not exercising enough or for not supplementing exercise with a healthy diet.

Ultimately, the fitness newsgroup, not unlike other electronic communities, can serve as a microcosm of cultural assumptions and attitudes that student participants may see as either harmful or helpful in the construction of both a personal and social identity through the technological access to the community. Although the writers of this ethnography of the fitness newsgroup saw the group foster both positive and negative identities for women and men alike, such students might also recognize that access to these groups can help test these cultural assumptions, challenging and

revising them through the very public culture of electronic discourse. Indeed, such electronic exchange falls within a conception of discourse that not only is social epistemic in framework but is also what Jasper Neel has termed "strong discourse," that which is tolerant of other discourses and is inherently rhetorical in its strategies of persuasion and argumentation to put all pre-conceived truths into question (208-210).

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